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SUBJECT: AUSTRIA AND AFGHANISTAN: MODEST, BUT REAL, PROGRESS

REF: STATE 122234

Classified By: Amb. William C. Eacho for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Austrian Foreign Minister Spindelegger publicly affirmed Dec. 2 that Austria would make a contribution to the civilian effort in Afghanistan. To consider Austria's specific contribution, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Interior, Justice, and Defense met that same day. Readouts of that meeting indicate Austria may contribute 5-7 staff to the EUPOL mission, possibly in Afghanistan itself, a significant policy shift. Over the last two months, Embassy Vienna has pursued sustained engagement on Afghanistan with the GoA. In the run-up to President Obama's Dec. 1 speech, we heard increasingly from interlocutors that Vienna "had gotten the message," and would engage to support the new Afghanistan/Pakistan strategy. In the end, Austria's civilian contribution will likely be modest, but the GoA's shift is a significant change in attitude. End Summary.

Embassy Press

¶2. (C) Austria, although a participant in ISAF, had in the last two years increasingly distanced itself from the operation -- declining, for example, to provide a military contribution for election security in 2009, something it had done in the past. Though the Foreign Ministry and Foreign Minister personally had maintained that Austria would make a civilian contribution -- most likely a police training contribution, opposition from the Interior and Justice Ministries effectively blocked any progress. The Defense Minister, citing a lack of resources (real enough) and domestic political factors (the popular press and public opinion reject any Afghanistan mission), has repeatedly made clear that Austrian will not increase its military presence (2-3 staff officers at ISAF HQ) in Afghanistan.

¶3. (C) Embassy has waged a sustained campaign to reverse this trend, employing both traditional and public diplomacy, staff at all levels, and Washington visitors. Ambassador has raised Austria's Afghanistan contribution in his initial calls on all officials, to include President Fischer, Chancellor Faymann, and the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Finance, Justice, and Interior. In each case he noted that Washington understood that Austria's army has real capability shortages that for now forestall a substantial new military commitment, but that Austria had -- and in other contexts regularly deployed -- civilian capabilities that were also needed in Afghanistan.

¶4. (U) The Ambassador delivered the same message in public appearances, to include a major speech at the Diplomatic Academy and in several press interviews. Early Dec. 2 the Ambassador gave a radio interview to national broadcaster ORF which was widely cited in media and coverage on the new Afghanistan policy throughout the day. Amb. also separately

taped a TV interview with ORF, part of which appeared on the nightly prime time national news broadcast. In a segment that also featured the Foreign Minister, the Ambassador urged Austria to join international efforts to help Afghanistan. On Dec. 3, the Ambassador called on the publisher-owner of "Die Krone," Austria's largest and most influential paper, encouraging him to support President Obama's initiative in Afghanistan and welcoming Austria's offer of help (see para 5 below).

15. (C) The Embassy also used Washington visitors, when available, to convey the Afghanistan message. Afghanistan figured heavily in discussion during the mid-November visit of EUR/CE Director Karagiannis. On Nov. 30, A/S for International Organizations Brimmer had a discussion on Afghanistan with MFA Political Director Stefan Lehne (septel) and discussed the topic again at a dinner with senior staff -- including the Chancellor's foreign policy advisor -- from the Social Democratic Party.

Payoff: Modest, But Real

16. (C) Prior to the Dec. 1 announcement, the Embassy increasingly heard from interlocutors that our message had been received. We were told that concerned ministers would meet to discuss Austria's contribution on Dec. 2 and the Chancellor's foreign policy advisor insisted at the Nov. 30 dinner that Austria would make a civilian contribution. The immediate reaction from the GoA to the President's message and the sustained effort by the Embassy came in a positive Dec. 2 statement from Foreign Minister Spindelegger.

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"Austria," he said, "according to (its) existing possibilities, will make a contribution to" strengthening Afghan civil society. A potentially important shift may also be seen in a Dec. 3 report that says that the Interior Ministry is looking for volunteer police trainers "to go to Afghanistan or a third country." As recently as Nov. 20, Interior Minister Fekter had insisted to the Ambassador that Austria could not send police trainers to Afghanistan because of the risks.

17. (C) MFA PolDir Lehne, who was present at the ministerial session, contacted Ambassador late Dec. 2 to report that the ministers' meeting had not taken any final decisions, but had identified various options that would be further explored. Interior Ministry Director for International Affairs Sandrisser reported Dec. 3 that the Ministry has begun an urgent top-to-bottom review of its options, and confirmed that this would include reconsidering the possibility of sending personnel to Afghanistan. That said, the Ministry is still focused on third country options, most notably the possibility of providing police training (as well as the customs training already being considered by the Finance Ministry) at the OSCE-sponsored Central Asia Border Management College in Dushanbe. Sandrisser had several specific questions (see para 9, below).

18. (C) In a conversation with Poloff, MFA Deputy Office Director for Asia added more detail, citing PolDir Lehne as his source. He reported that the ministers had agreed in principle that Austria should send 5-7 law enforcement officials to Afghanistan to support the EUPOL mission. They would be, he confirmed, in Afghanistan. This proposal will be discussed further at the cabinet meeting (Council of Ministers) on Dec. 9. Bilek said none of the details had been worked out, so it could take a while to reach a final decision.

Sandrisser Questions; Action Request

19. (C) Sandrisser stressed that the Interior Ministry

re-think was partly a reaction to the U.S. message delivered in recent meetings, and he said that the Ministry would be interested in U.S. views on some of the ideas being considered in the Ministry. In that context, he wondered whether participation in the Dushanbe school (or also at what he described as a U.S.-run border management training center in Bishkek) would be acceptable to the U.S., especially if the programs there could be expanded to include regular police training, not just border control. Econ/Pol Counselor said the U.S. welcomed all contributions, but that we believed police training needed to be in-country, given the depth and breadth of issues that need to be addressed. Sandrisser said the Austrians were looking again at EUPOL, were in contact with EUPOL management, and would review EUPOL's next call for contributions, expected in January. Sandrisser asked specifically for contacts at the Dushanbe and Bishkek programs with whom the options for Austrian participation could be discussed. He also explained that Austria's training experience has largely been in either train-the-trainer or management training, and asked for information or contacts with expertise on such programs in the Afghanistan context.

Comment

¶10. (C) It remains to be seen whether the contribution suggested above will ultimately be deployed. The differences between the MFA and Interior Ministry readouts and plans for next steps are striking and other obstacles remain. We expect a skeptical-to-negative reaction from the popular press and from both left- and right-wing opposition when the outlines of a deployment become known and we are conscious that Chancellor Faymann tends to follow his population's relative disinterest in foreign affairs. Nevertheless, the GoA's tentative plan is a significant shift in official attitude. It probably reflects a combination of reality setting in, criticism from other EU partners of Austria's lack of participation, and a desire to support an Obama Administration priority, as well as this Embassy's efforts. We will continue to engage the GoA and Austrian media and public vigorously in the coming weeks.

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